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THE ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ROSSETTI'S
POETRY.

"Shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends"
and
"If it would but apprehend some joy
It comprehends some bringer of that joy."

ROSSETTI appears to rouse in a good many people a strong feeling of antagonism, even of disgust, and in perhaps a still larger number a touch of contempt. He is called morbid and sensuous, both in the plain meaning of the word, and in its underlying more objectionable sense. Perhaps his two-fold artistic production gives an idea that his poetry was too much of an auxiliary in the expression of his inner life to have real value. There is a dim resentment against him as towards one who attempts to strain one art into an imitation of another. The detractors under this head attack the short narrative poems or ballads as mere pictures, and sometimes not even clear pictures.

But others go further; they consider that he not only deals too much with the mere external view of things, but that while he gives a minute and sometimes morbid analysis of emotions of all kinds, he deals little with the more intellectual interests of the spirit. The soul for him exists only in its passion, not in its striving active creation. He has little or no speculation on the problems of life and death, very little moral speculation as we understand it. He appears to utterly neglect the leading factors in our spiritual experience, and by so doing, it may be thought, loses the link of experience which joins us to the poetic land of promise.

With regard to the first point, it may be remarked that Rossetti himself considered that he had mastered the power of expression more completely in poetry than in painting, and that it seems probable that if any objectionable confounding of the arts really took place, it was the painting into which the alien element was imported. A short examination of the picture of

the Annunciation and of one or two poems may illustrate this.

Rossetti's method of conceiving his subject is peculiar. He is not troubled by the question of what actually occurred, does not attempt to win our credence for, or interest in, the event. The angel, like the books and the lilies, is scarcely more than a symbol, a hieroglyphic showing the particular bearing of Mary's thought; that is, his subject is not the Annunciation at all, but Mary's character. The idea of the spiritual splendor of the event is NOT allowed to absorb or transfigure the material facts. You are given the physical reality of her appearance. Her body is drawn up harmoniously with the nervous strain of thought, not with the subject of that thought. She sees the events conditioned at every point by her human nature. But the meaning of the whole picture lies in the expression of her face—or rather, of her eyes—(the mouth is sad, submissive, not deflected, probably, from its usual expression)—of which it is an explanation or projection. Her intense abstraction results physically in an inability to see any but broad facts of coloring, and her intense simplicity of mind is portrayed by a certain stiffness of figuring, as if she were occupied with the unfleshed ideas of things.

The poetic counterpart to the Annunciation is the "Blessed Damozel." The type of woman portrayed too is very much the same—very simple and not apt to correlate appearances, destroying their personality by seeing them as the manifestation of a single force. Hence the simplicity of coloring in the picture is balanced by the sweet clearness of the surface-thought in the poem, which gives it a sort of singing quality. It has little of the slow richness of Rossetti's other work. As he thought of her the appropriate world spread around her, depending on her like variations in music or as a chord on a single note. But at the same time her heaven is not merely a setting for her, nor yet is it quite a personification of ideas in her mind. It is simply an articulation, without distinction of planes of existence (as is common to Rossetti) of her whole inner world. This world such a woman believes to be entirely the reflection of an outer one, never dreaming that it can be in any way due to her own consciousness, so mere an instinct is

faith. Hence to gain her point of view these ideas must be painted in as background. (At the same time all ideas which color our minds, did really to Rossetti gain a certain being which remains.) He probably, indeed, did not intend to indicate that they had anything like the same clearness of outline to her at the given moment. When "the light thrilled towards her filled with angels in strong level flight," one suspects that he is describing the manner in which she was affected by the beating of the waves of light, as she might have explained it had she been perfectly conscious. But in reality there is a sort of pause in thought before her emotions have taken definite expression—a pause in which she feels that there lives within her another world that finds words to reach our comprehension in the thick-coming, thrilling beat of wings—the close succession of their rounded tops being suggested to her mind by the light.

In the same way, in the more senuous poems, the acute realization and description of the experiences of sense is at once the articulation and the justification to the intellect of the singularly elusive movements in the spiritual organism. There is an example in the "Last Confession." The description of the woman laughing in the tavern with its loathsome confounding of human, animal and vegetable life, ("The vine crawl'd in her back") so that as we think of it, emotion and even perception seems a horrible disease, is but a concrete presentment of the subtle elements of coarseness detected by the man later in the girl's manner. Almost all his painting in words seems to have this object, and connected with his ethical views, which will be examined later on, it is a perfectly admissible explanation of his sometimes touching on what appear too merely earthly aspects of things.

The other side of this intensely developed consciousness, comes out most clearly in "Sister Helen." In it you have the poetry of the relations of the different persons gathered into concrete facts, which by the omission chiefly of certain coloring matter of detail, gives an impression of strangeness. We are in the habit of saying that our state of mind colors the appearance of things. But there is more than that here. Rose Mary's grief was "not hers, but the whole world's pain." In the first

sharp moment of realization there appeared to be a power of communication between her and external things, so close that she could not tell the originating consciousness. So in "Sister Helen," the riding of the horsemen and the agonized voices on the wind are real, but the purely picturesque quality is made so prominent that these real things appear the presentment of a distempered mind, and the departure from external realism is accentuated by the refrain which reveals the naked forces in contention, and gives us the ideal conception of the story.

Now it may, I think, be shown from these specimens that Rossetti is a true theological poet, and in this connection he has a certain affinity with Browning. We have the same striving after intellectual cognizance of partially physical sensations in the latter. He is always testing the question—at what point the purely sensuous passes into the intellectual. But the ends at which the poets aim are different. Browning's real subject of examination is always the nature of the Divine Being, who is to be made non-anthropomorphic by supposing him to admit into his being, elements which no man would nakedly confess; the whole vague figure being somehow whitewashed into infinity by Browning's peculiar version of "now we see through a glass darkly." He is thus led to this analysis by the attempt to build up his conception of "other modes of being,"—Rossetti, by his intense interest in the emotions themselves.

It thus appears that the poet's two styles, that dealing apparently with the physical nature of things, and that with a sort of fantastic distilled emotion, are due to the same source; and that to justify him we must find some sufficient ground for this absorbing interest in phases of subjective life, interest, that is, rather in individuality, unlimited by objective circumstance, than apparently in the relation of the mind to the general order of things.

The tradition of our poetry has led the modern reader to expect—almost to require—an underlying reference to the historical aspect of theology. It is as the Source of things that the poet as poet has considered the Divine Being. But it is not necessary to approach the problem of the reality of life by this road. Nor does the fact that the ordinary person does so ap-

proach it, make it the poet's only path. It is true that from one point of view all art is an attempt to systematize the intellectual intuitions derived from the totality of experience—not merely to educe the laws of progress and of essential life from great events and intellectual movements, unveiling more and more the hidden birth of thought, but also to draw out the soul which gives beauty and purity to the experiences of sense, raising the human nearer heaven. In this aspect of his character, the poet must be the centre of a vast system of emotional forces, having their sources in all these springs. But this is only one side of his work; he must be something more than a mere recorder, more even than a mere interpreter. For an artist is not only a prophet catching the whispers of the Divine Central thought; but, as it were, a defeated Creator-God, who showing us the fragments of his design of life in actual facts, makes us imperfectly see the scheme of a world which never was, but had been perhaps rejected in that divine thought, as being too near its own essence, too little transfused with sense. It is necessary that all the materials of this other world should be found in life as it is, but it is not necessary,—it is perhaps impossible—that it should comprehend all the spiritual aspirations and intuitions derived from the present system. These are due to sympathy of the unit with the informing thought, and the latter being changed, the former would, in fact, disappear, and must, therefore, be neglected in a poetic reconstruction. Nor would the apparent partiality of this view necessarily detract from its truthfulness because we cannot at once conclude that the Divine Being's essence is to be found in life, but merely his thought. There are in fact three possible relationships between what we will call the Supreme Being and this system of things. The first is that of an historic Creator, an absolutely unchangeable connection; the second is that of body to soul, unchangeable too, but of infinite complexity; the third is that of subject and object, so to speak, the thinker and the thought. This last admits of endless variety—all true for their time but not true for any other. It is, therefore, possible that the absence of this particular type of question in the poet may be due not to his limitations, but to the fact that the real emotions of his con-

temporaries are not stirred by these things; the strings along which his music should quiver are not taut, because the God-thought has changed. Hence if we can prove that Rossetti really has vindicated our spiritual existence in some way, wherever he plants the ladder up which he climbs to Heaven, surely the reproach of preoccupation with secondary objects would vanish.

Now what strikes one as the important thing to realize about Rossetti's poetry is, that he deals not with the subjects of thought but with the processes of mind. He is not interested in questions of what we call historical facts; his whole energy is bent towards the accurate analysis of the perceptive powers which register these facts and of their reflex action. To him emotion was the most divine thing within our cognizance, and he finds in it a promise of immortality—"A rainbow on the storm of death," "The breath of God in man that warranteth the inmost, utmost things of faith." He cannot believe in the merely natural essence of any passion or pleasure—"My soul I know not from my body nor thee from myself, neither our love from God." His emotions he feels do not at any time begin and end in himself; there is always something else which interacts. This something may be original, independent and active, or it may have been at first merely projected by the necessities of our minds, and by development incorporated. The important point is not its origin but its existence, (the latter theory does not preclude the belief in a Supreme Being as the author of things, but merely the belief in his imparting of his own nature to the world.) If in the highest trances of thought we have a belief in an external, all-pervading objective thought, and if for the greatest expansion of our spirits an honest belief in its objectivity is necessary, then this requirement seems to form a proof of the existence of another "mode of Being." Not of a creative spirit exactly in the sense of one which was a finite source of things, but a sustaining spirit, creative in so far as it imparts life through all time. To it there truly is no to-morrow, no yesterday. It exists in the present.

Thought, that is deductive or crystalizing thought, he felt,

is apt to be destructive. The gray pictures of memory "of that which had life's form and love's" do not give the satisfaction to the mind of the vibrations of the present emotion. But there is a kind of consciousness which does not reflect on the sensations, but is, as it were, twin born with them; so that, for instance, a mere physical impression of light is accompanied by a feeling of an intense acuteness and clearness of thought, as if barriers had been suddenly broken down. The natural world lives always in the moment, is immature, or at least does not age towards death. It is the fountain of pure emotion, and the perfect realization of the sensuous delights of life is the real absorption into the infinite. Consciousness must not turn into thought or the spell is broken, and the moral element bursts in. "The secret of the wells of life" we can never know, but sometimes in the hot sunshine when we seem consciously to be drinking in the essence of physical life, the spirit of everlasting existence brushes our lips and brings cessation of care. It is then that the poet hushes us with the words "say nothing now unto her, lest she weep."

Not that the secret of life is a material one, but it is through an abnormally developed keenness of sense that Rossetti reached the spiritual. It is at the noon-hour that he hears the footsteps in another world, in an atmosphere of blazing heat and golden light. The "Song-God is the Sun-God." Myriads of creatures are made to stir by the sunshine, whose individual existence we had scarcely realized; and partly the tendency to multiply the process, partly the great physical quickening of our own senses, make us believe that impersonal forces—the sunshine or the wind—have power to come and touch us. The air appears full of thinking presences, of "a folding sense like prayer, which is, as God is, everywhere."

It was Rossetti's great merit that he saw the poetic value of this state of mind and body, and knew how to use it both to transfuse the lower element with spiritual worth, and to make the supernatural seem an experienced fact. Wordsworth had done something of the same kind of thing, but he had not perhaps quite sufficient faith in the voiceless revelations of his trances. He stills us till the beatings of our own hearts fill the silence with a supernatural language, but he neither tells us

what he has heard in these "seasons of calm weather" nor has he any clear recollection of the different phases of the emotion. Nor does Rossetti, to say truth, tell us much of what he has heard, but he admits of a vast variety in the coloring, so to speak, of the intellectual intuitions which are sacred as carrying a direct warrant of their eternal origin. It is the polytheism of his mental and moral world which underlies the great beauty of his personifications and allegories. Like the Greeks and Blake he felt an individuality in an emotion before he could define that emotion itself—his feelings pass through the stage of personification before they reach clear expression to the intellect. It is not that he thinks in metaphor, but that the poetic idea of a thing seemed in his case to be the link between sensation in the widest sense, and perception, instead of being the result of both. It becomes in fact a sort of intermediate personality. In Blake's case it accounts for his visions, and he comes quite near Rossetti's usual use of it in such a poem as the "Tiger," where the terror and the beauty of the animal seem to him to be such living things, that they are in some sense more directly God-created; the pulsation of the thought that makes them appeals to our minds more directly than in other things.

Now this importance of emotion is greatest in that of love. Firstly because, in Rossetti's view, the mind is more frequently and more completely exalted to that state of emotion which feels the outside force, and secondly because it forms the nearest parallel to the relationship between phenomenal thought and our thought, and is therefore a revelation of the meaning and working of life. His idea of love appears to be a perfect sympathy, resulting not from original unity, but from diversity that grows by reciprocal impression into a new entity. Hence his agony when there is a change of feeling in the other person, because when "this sun bewitched" burns away the shadow of her passion in his mind, both God and his soul go too. For it is the eternity of emotion that necessitates God. Not only does the obliteration of the emotion suggest by analogy that there may have been no interaction, and hence no outside thinking force, but if we believe that an emotion can be blotted out, then there is no soul. We speak theologically as if ex-

perienced emotions and thoughts grouped themselves, after being detached from our minds, and lived on; but in reality emotions have no continuity of individuality at all. Now if they pass utterly away, consciousness may have an enormous length of life, but can scarcely be immortal, because it exists only in experiencing; and therefore the experiences are actual parts of its subsistence, not merely different forms of a pervading spirit. The soul would therefore merely be a fictional aggregate of these outside ideas which would each have an existence in themselves, and be then annihilated. Hence the importance of the permanent preservation of emotions. It is significant from this point of view that his chief work should be a sonnet sequence. In the "House of Life" the separate poems are monuments to the "deathless hours" of his past. "No alien spell" must meet him in the land past death. "A well-known door" must be "even yet my life-porch in eternity, even with one presence filled, as once of yore, or mocking winds whirl round a chaff-strewn floor . . . my words and me."

It is in connection with this idea that he says, "Would that I knew there was a God to thank, when thanks rise in me." He desires not so much a responsive consciousness, as a witness to the reality of his gratitude—another consciousness which should give his emotions truth by garnering up into a permanent idea the experiences of the high-flood moments of his consciousness. This shadowy aggregate of ideas following behind, partially dependent on the Divine mind, corresponds to the orthodox soul.

We, therefore, come back to this, that Rossetti deals almost exclusively with the processes of mind, and that he is successful in suggesting a certain divinity in them, a supernatural element. He seems to feel that all thought (and under that term is comprehended all original life of the mind, realization of sensation, sincere emotion) is divine, and we need search no further, but be transfused in it. His work might then have gone on to show how thought becomes an active force, how the emotions force this frame of things into their law, and hence the supreme importance of the individual life which, however insignificant a citizen, is yet a law-giver in this commonwealth.

The work of Rossetti has not been completed. The life of the spirit is indeed all in all to Maeterlinck. With him the sort of ghost of our emotions enters into an external sensible occurrence, so that an impression is produced that all events are in a state of flux and dependent on our consciousness not only for perception but for their birth into the region where they appear to impress other minds. Gradually as his plots develop, the spiritual causes of all things become more and more apparent—the unspiritualized pass utterly away, and then the other spiritual forces behind the veil come out and meet, and the purgation or translation of the soul is complete. The external world and the human mind are two vessels which are filled simultaneously with the same informing thought by some flood of ideas beyond this world. Though the individual's emotions are the only truth, yet somehow he himself is powerless. Perfect morality and wisdom would enable the individual to conform by sympathy to the creative thought so that the wheels of the progress of the universe should run in straight paths, but they would not enable him in any way to affect this progress. The solution towards which Rossetti was groping seems to me to have been a greater one. He found individuality everywhere, objective personality of infinite diversity, and he feels that this is somehow the guiding force in the universe. But he has not taught us how it becomes active. His personifications remain such in spite of a glimmer of real divinity in them—the extraordinarily concrete individuality with which he could endow the most subtle strand of feeling. With him the emotion seems to remain just off the ground of our world, apparently greater than our consciousness can contain, and yet hardly incorporated into another. The feeling beginning in the mind seems to pass out and take shape visibly before us, so that you find "Your own foot-steps meeting you." He will probably never be properly appreciated until his work has received its coping-stone and we see the substance of what he has given us "a shaken shadow, intolerable, of ultimate things unuttered, the frail screen."

J. SPENS.

GLASGOW.